About Object: Australian Centre for Design

Object is one of Australia’s most innovative arts organisations and has played a significant leadership role in the contemporary craft and design sector since it first opened in 1965. Constantly evolving to keep at the leading edge of innovation, we act as a bridge between different communities in design. Object nurtures and supports design in all of its creative and cultural incarnations — from architecture to jewellery, and from digital design to fashion, textiles and bio-inspired design.

Object maintains strong connections to designers, makers and craftspeople representing and showcasing their work through exhibitions, public programs, learning resources, tours, digital content production, publications and retail activities. We focus on building partnerships with dynamic organisations and individuals, pooling knowledge and resources in order to evolve and discover new territory with innovation and experimentation. Through these initiatives, Object strives to nurture a nation of innovative thinkers and inspire audiences to use design in their daily lives.

We: publish books on Australian design; offer design learning programs for K-12 students and teachers; operate a highly regarded retail store featuring handmade objects crafted by Australian artists; and produce innovative, design-focused digital content. Our program features up to 200 designers annually.

Through our creative programs and partnerships, we have reached an audience of more than 390,000 people in a single year. We showcase the best of Australian design at Object Gallery in Surry Hills; create touring exhibitions shown at venues nation-wide, from the Melbourne Museum to the Manning Regional Art Gallery and from the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Launceston to the Sturt Gallery in Mittagong. We present exhibitions of leading Australian design in major venues around the world from the V&A in London to Spiral Gallery in Tokyo and the Milan Triennale Museum.

Over the last decade, we have been witness to the international momentum surrounding the powerful and transformative impact of design. We believe that public engagement in design is one important way of developing our creative culture. We can use design to empower our audiences with new tools to build
capacity in critical and creative thought that can flow into all aspects of people’s lives.

**A Definition of Design**

Design is a process and not just an outcome.

Good design results in objects, places, systems or services that work aesthetically, functionally and commercially. Its value can be measured economically, socially and environmentally. It is a way of thinking, a set of creative and cognitive skills, methods, tools and techniques that defines problems, explores questions, finds solutions and then makes the solutions real. It bridges the gap between ideas and markets, shaping ideas to become attractive options for users. Design has the potential to improve people’s lives while making the smallest possible impact on the planet. (Adapted from *The Good Design Plan*, Design Council (UK), June 2008, p.9.)

While there is a need for a national design policy of its own, design should also be an integral component of the NSW Arts and Cultural Policy. Object is currently working towards the realisation of its 2015 Vision whereby design takes a central and prominent role in NSW society. This 2015 Vision, a copy of which is included as an Appendix to this document, includes the creation of a new Design Centre to potentially be based at Barangaroo in Sydney. This Centre will serve not only as a nerve centre for the NSW arts, craft and design community, and as a space for this community to interact with broader aspects of society, but also as an international portal, allowing for greater worldwide engagement with the NSW design sector.

Design offers a mechanism for connection and innovation amongst the cultural sector, and allows for engagement across the entire range of NSW industry and development. The response that follows outlines the importance of design within the NSW Arts and Cultural Policy and the value this can add to the social, cultural and fiscal economies.

We commend the NSW government for initiating the development of the first NSW Arts and Cultural Policy as it has the potential to show how we can best nurture, harness and unleash the power of the cultural sector for the benefit of NSW society and the economy as a whole. Object firmly believes in the need to appropriately address these issues in view of a changing global landscape where multiculturalism and international interconnectedness is increasing on a daily basis.

Paramount to this Policy is recognising the need for a broad long-term vision that allows for short-term agility and innovation. It is also vital that the arts and culture be encouraged to intersect with wider industry, as it is where these elements cross-pollinate, such as the design and science industries, that the most dynamic progressions can and are achieved. Hence, the NSW Arts and Cultural Policy cannot be placed in a silo — it must be enabled to break out and provide
opportunity for audiences to engage and interact in ways that embrace new expectations and needs.

In this response, Object will address a range of issues and goals detailed in the Discussion Paper. We have not responded to aspects or goals identified in the Discussion Paper which might fall outside of what we view as our area of direct engagement with the arts and culture, or where we believe other organisations will better address the issues in question, we have elected to condense our response for the sake of brevity and to try and remove multiplicity across organisations. However, this does not in any way mean that we feel these issues might only be as important as the relevant space devoted to them might imply.

Strengthen the Capacity of the Arts

Collaboration

Design, as an element of the Arts and with strong relationships to science, industry and innovation, contributes enormously to society, and is often under-recognised. Design as a discipline is a major connecting agent between these sectors and the arts, allowing for the forging of partnerships with enormous societal benefits. Examples include insulin-supplying jewellery and nature-inspired scientific advancement. As a nation recognised as innovative and progressive, the value of this to the economy is immense.

Object strongly supports the development of a NSW State led Design Policy, devised collaboratively and activated across all departments of cabinet. Both the Victorian and Queensland state governments have implemented a design policy. This Design Policy needs to be developed by the Arts, but in collaboration with NSW Trade and Investment. The results of this collaboration must then be applied across and engage all areas of government, from regional affairs to education.

Within this context, the power of digital to aid and speed up these connections cannot be underestimated. As current tech-native generations come of age and begin to play a greater role in the shaping of values and the economy, the need for digital technology and its understanding to be developed and embraced across the cultural sector cannot be underestimated, especially with the promise of the National Broadband Network and how that will help to unlock collaborations around the world.

Curriculum

Object is a strong believer in the importance of design within the national curriculum where it now has a significant placement in the Arts Curriculum alongside Visual Arts. As outlined, design in its native form provides immense benefit to society, and the importance of strongly incorporating design into the curriculum is therefore vital to ensure this contribution is continued. Furthermore, however, it is important that this is extended, and that design is additionally
recognised as a capacity-building skill that can be utilised as creative problem solving. To this end it is similarly important that these skills be passed on to teachers, as the primary party fostering this development within children. Design thinking as a discipline offers incredible opportunity for society to engage the principles of design across education and society as a whole, but this needs to begin with teaching the teachers. Pilots tasked with incorporating design thinking more broadly into education are already underway in New South Wales — over the last two years, Object began a ‘Design Emergency’ pilot, taking design thinking into primary schools. Object is also actively developing a Design Journeys program as a way to better equip teachers to engage with this theory and practice.

Again, a digital capacity with the arts and cultural sector is hugely important in order to fully implement the developments in these areas. As noted, the first tech-native generations are coming of age, and digital is their primary tool for communication, entertainment and research. Delivery of these programs digitally, within the curriculum, provides opportunity for the curriculum to infiltrate broader areas of their digital engagement, making learning a more dynamic and integrated part of every aspect of the lives of coming generations.

A Digital 21st Century

Resourcing Digital

Object feels that the importance of developing a solid framework around technology within the arts and culture is vital to ensure that this sector can flourish.

Resources within the arts at this juncture are scarce to begin with, but when applied to the digital realm the situation often appears dire. While there is some embracing of technology within arts funding agencies and government departments, it is proportionately minor, and well below the levels needed to truly innovate, create, and take our place amongst the leaders of the world, as we are creatively equipped to do.

Object has been leading the vanguard of Australian arts organisations embracing technology, with our 2015 Vision clearly outlining an intention of making one third of our activity happening within the digital sphere. As a publicly funded arts organisation, however, we are beholden to a cultural policy and departmental framework that was developed at a time when this technological capacity did not exist. As such, the ability for Object, like most cultural institutions reliant on government funding, to move quickly to adapt to a changing technological climate, and the needs and possibilities this climate requires and provides, is very limited.

Resource Agility

To truly encourage the use of emerging technologies and new ideas to support the creative industries and to increase access and participation, not only does more
funding need to be made available to the sector to develop skills, increase sector literacy and engage with these technologies, but it needs to be coupled with a less restrictive framework housing it, enabling organisations and individuals to move within the evolving technological climate. For example, despite falling circulation meaning it was an inefficient method of production, it took three years of lobbying to allow Object to migrate its printed magazine to a digital format — something that has seen its circulation and engagement not only greatly increase domestically, but expand to over 130 countries internationally.

While the National Broadband Network rollout promises to provide the infrastructure to allow Australia to truly expand into the digital realm, the infrastructure alone is not enough when there is no resourcing to provide content within it. Object strongly endorses a proposition of creating a development fund, to allow for the creation of both artistic and educational content, and for the development of skills within the industry (and the upgrade of equipment) to allow the NBN to be appropriately leveraged. With this resourcing, organisations such as Object could begin to develop content and delivery pathways for various programs.

This content could include the rolling out of the Design Emergency program (K-12) on a national scale, delivering material to teachers in NSW regional areas, without the cost associated with the physical delivery of the program. Object could also continue to develop the integration of digital with traditional exhibitions — various digital-based content could be developed to sit complementary and supplementary to an exhibition, and would then be available for engagement both locally, regionally and internationally.

**Supporting Excellence in the Arts Across NSW**

**Touring Exhibition Support**

The ability to tour physical exhibitions and artifacts to international markets is important in making that initial connection to NSW arts and culture and allowing for an immediate engagement. Funding for this has been very scarce in recent years — for example, Object was only able to tour 2008 exhibition Freestyle: New Australian Design for Living to one overseas destination (Milan) due to a lack of support, and this support ended up coming from the Victorian state government. Last year, Object finished touring Menagerie: Contemporary Indigenous Sculpture, the largest and most comprehensive survey of Indigenous sculpture ever produced by any museum or gallery in Australia, which is unable to be seen outside of Australia due to the lack of a significant funding program to support international touring.

**Supporting Indigenous Culture**

**Indigenous Support**
Support for Indigenous art and culture has been strong, and does appear to be increasing. Object for one is a strong supporter of Indigenous handcrafts and sculpture, as evidenced through exhibitions such as Menagerie: Contemporary Indigenous Sculpture, and previous exhibitions such as Woven Forms and Art on a String. It is incredibly important, however, that government support in this area is not only maintained but enhanced and increased — much Indigenous culture survives and is passed on using artforms or interpretations of artforms, such as painting, sculpture and oral storytelling, and so in many ways it is cultural institutions who are best placed to encourage and act as conduits for this. This support needs to embrace more than the creation of physical exhibitions — increased digital capacity will allow for linkages between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities globally, fostering the transfer of ideas, knowledge and information.

**Indigenous Collaborative Design**

Design also plays a unique role in how Indigenous culture can transform and innovate, utilising modern developments and technology. Design firms such as the Sydney-based studio Koskela are now working with Indigenous communities (in this instance, weavers from Elcho Island) to create handcrafted lights and furniture that incorporate traditional Indigenous artistic practice into widely marketable consumer goods. While these objects were part of an exhibition at Object Gallery, they are emblematic of new directions in the collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous designers and makers. These design-led directions are capacity building, and are a sustainable practice for the community.

**Organisational Sustainability**

One of the biggest challenges for a review such as that proposed by the NSW Arts and Cultural Policy discussion paper is the limited resourcing within the cultural sector.

Currently, funding within the cultural sector is **not sustainable for organisations like Object**. Over the last eight years, funding has failed to keep pace with inflation.

As can be seen by the below chart, Object has seen a decrease of 18% in real terms — this equates to a funding shortfall of over $200,000 from 2004 to the end of 2011 and continues in a similar trajectory through 2012 and 2013.

This situation is duplicated by many other visual arts organisations across the country, who, like Object, have gone from operating with a modest annual surplus to operating with an unsustainable annual deficit.
In Conclusion

While there is a need for the development of a cross-departmental NSW Design Policy, design is also a vital part of the cultural sector, informing not only the arts, but engaging collaboration across all areas of art, craft, design and industry.

It is important that this NSW Arts and Cultural Policy addresses not only the resourcing shortages and neglected areas of the cultural sector especially within small and medium sized organisations, but also the increasing importance of digital as a method of engagement and consumption. Digital is fast-moving and global in nature, so it is important that the promise of technology is coupled with an understanding of the necessary agility in order to best harness the power it offers NSW’s cultural industry.

To aid in the harnessing and promotion of NSW’s design capabilities, Object is evolving towards the new Design Centre outlined in our 2015 Vision, attached here for further reference. This Design Centre will be a localised hub serving as a nerve centre for NSW collaboration as well as an international portal to what NSW has to offer in key sectors of the arts and creative industries.
The importance of the NSW Arts and Cultural Policy to the next ten years within NSW cannot be underestimated, and the value of design housed within this policy is enormous. Design has the power to unleash creativity, forge connections and foster innovation — without national leadership and support it risks floundering where our state and international counterparts are flourishing.

Design can be the nexus where true cross-disciplinary thinking is encouraged to thrive and the design process can be used to break silos across education, business, government, the arts and community. We need design because the world is changing rapidly, and design can play a catalytic role in the continuing evolution and transformation of NSW as the leading State for Arts and Culture.

Response To Proposed Goals And Questions

In response to the discussion paper, and in addition to the above submission, we have had a number of conversations with senior Object: Australian Design Centre management and key staff, as well as input from our Board of Directors. In light of these conversations, and in consideration of the sectors and communities that we are most aligned with, we have selected a number of the proposed goals and questions that we think are particularly relevant to our current situation and the broader situation currently facing the arts and cultural sector.

Proposed Goal: NSW is recognised for its contemporary Aboriginal art and culture, founded on respect and recognition of the significance of NSW Aboriginal cultural heritage. (pg 23 of discussion paper.)

In the preceding response to the Discussion Paper we go into further detail on strengthening Indigenous art, practice and participation in NSW. Indeed, throughout our history we have committed significant resource to the development of major Indigenous cultural exhibitions, including Menagerie: Contemporary Indigenous Sculpture (since purchased and currently on display at the Australian Museum), Woven Forms and the Australian contribution to the 2nd International Triennale of Craft at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa, Japan. The major cultural institutions in NSW (such as the Sydney Opera House, Sydney Theatre Company and the Powerhouse Museum) need to be encouraged, alongside further encouragement for NSW’s small and medium organisations, to co-create and better support the profiling of Indigenous culture. Setting this leadership precedent will enable a raised profile, trickling through other organisations and to audiences to ensure sustainability.

Proposed Goal: NSW strengthens its position as Australia’s largest arts sector, retaining and attracting acclaimed artists, cultural workers and organisations. (pg 17.)

Per capita investment in the cultural sector in NSW is low compared to the rest of Australia, and especially when held against that in Victoria. The level of investment for most cultural organisations in NSW has increased only negligibly in dollar
terms over the last decade, meaning that, in real terms, the funding has decreased—Object’s real term decline in funding from 2004 to 2011 was 18% when indexed against CPI. Without increased organisational investment, achieving the goal of becoming Australia’s largest arts sector goal will be very difficult.

We propose a ‘Matching Funds’ model for increasing investment in NSW cultural organisations, whereby new funds raised by cultural organisations are matched by government in order to diversify the income base at the same time as it is growing.

**Proposed Goal: NSW State Cultural Institutions and major organisations are preeminent Australian cultural destinations, renowned for their programming, collections and educational role.** (pg 20.)

A concern of ours throughout this Discussion Paper is that it appears to foster a heavy bias towards the major organisations. For NSW to be a compelling destination and centre for cultural tourism, engagement and creation, the small and medium organisations need to be better resourced and promoted. Small and medium organisations nurture new talent and act as a testing ground for riskier innovations—simply strengthening the major organisations does not build robustness and depth, providing layered engagement opportunities for the future. One of the biggest issues for the small and medium organisations relates to facilities—they are often inadequate, in disrepair, or simply non-existent.

Major organisations need to be encouraged to collaborate with smaller organisations on cultural projects. These collaborations both serve to develop new ideas and talents, but showcase the smaller organisations to the audiences of the majors, encouraging ongoing audience engagement with the different layers of cultural offerings.

**Proposed Goal: NSW establishes and maintains world class arts and cultural facilities to support creative practice and facilitate engagement.** (pg 39.)

As noted, the primary issue for cultural organisations in NSW is the need for suitable permanent facilities. This is especially important for small and medium organisations. From our own perspective, Object is soon to celebrate fifty years of programming in NSW and has never had a permanent home, and the stability and confidence that one brings.

This Policy needs to ensure that the topic of facilities is extended beyond the major organisations, and recognition is given to smaller organisations and their needs for permanent, upgraded, and/or suitable facilities.

**Proposed Goal: Sydney is an acknowledged cultural leader in the Asia-Pacific region, drawing on the unique offerings of the CBD and the broader Sydney region.** (pg 36.)
If we look to successful cultural cities such as Brisbane, it is apparent that there is significant support for cultural events extending into the Asia-Pacific region, bringing together the arts, diplomacy and cultural exchange to position the city as a centre within the region. Queensland’s proactive development of, and investment in, events such as the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art and the Asia Pacific Screen Awards spur on this exchange and ensures their leadership position.

Much of Sydney’s multicultural program offerings are outside the Sydney CBD, located where multicultural communities are centred. For Sydney to become an acknowledged leader in the region, more multicultural programming should be encouraged to take place in the Sydney CBD. Using city sites such as Barangaroo to host festivals and celebrations of a variety of cultures will begin to redress this imbalance and encourage greater collaboration with our cultural neighbours. An example of a successful venue achieving similar goals can be found in Toronto, Canada’s Harbourfront Centre.

*Proposed Goal: Production and delivery of the arts in NSW is flexible, interactive and adequately connected, to realise the benefits of the virtual age.* (pg 47.)

The challenges confronting cultural organisations wishing to operate in the interactive and virtual spaces are addressed in some depth in the submission preceding these goal responses. To reiterate, in order to reach this goal the major blockage relates to investment in the organisations and their skills and expertise, as well as to the surrounding infrastructure allowing the organisations to realise their ambitions.

Investment in organisational infrastructure and expertise is vital in achieving this goal, alongside a fixed understanding of the technical upgrades to the existing infrastructure fuelling the virtual age.

*Proposed Goal: Regional NSW is well networked, has good access to and contributes to the best of the State’s arts and cultural experiences.* (pg 33.)

In May 2013, Object had 6 different major exhibitions in 5 different NSW cities and town simultaneously—according to Museums and Galleries NSW, we are one of the biggest touring organisations in the state, second only to Sydney Living Museums. We note this to encourage greater involvement with regional touring from other major organisations, such as the Powerhouse Museum and Sydney Living Museum.

Encouraging co-creation between urban and regional centres in cultural programming will continue to increase the level of skills and regional access to these experiences.